

THE  
CLASSIC  
ALBUM

# Phatek Modus Operandi

Virgin, 1997

A milestone in D'n'B from the era of two-second sample time. **Roy Spencer** studies Phatek's method of operating



**W**hat is 'Intelligent' Drum 'n' Bass? Is it a tune that Prof. Hawkin bumps on his iPod?

Maybe it's a track that gets mentioned in a keynote speech at a conference of Pure Mathematics?

The image it conjures up is of some chin-stoking academic musing over the witty use of time signatures, rather than shocking out to them at a sweaty Rave. With Phatek it's not mutually exclusive, you can do both. So, don a mortar board and cosy up to a bass bin, we're wheeling up the

seminal Drum 'n' Bass masterpiece, *Modus Operandi*.

It's blatantly Phatek's dissertation on Breakbeat techniques. He beavered away 24/7 in the lab on drum programming for weeks at a time, sweating over the E-MU sampler like an obsessed scientist on the brink of a breakthrough in his lab. Due to the laborious nature on working on vintage gear, every single drum hit was carefully pieced together one at a time.

It wasn't just the production that was given meticulous attention.

Titles of tracks were pulled from dusty textbooks on the nature of infinity. The album's name is taken from Latin. Tunes like *The Fifth Column*, which meditate on the dark side of the ancient Samurai, feature recordings of actual martial arts weaponry, to do the subject matter justice. "The album was about technique, and the way I put it together," says Phatek. "Around that time I had honed my craft to where I had wanted it to be. Before that I'd been making 'tracks' and developing what I was all about for about three years. But by the time I got to the *Hidden Camera EP*, and then the album, *Modus*... I think I had the ability to take an idea, and take it all the way to how I wanted it to sound. For what it was, it was perfect in my mind." It must have taken determination, given the tools at the time. "The other part of it was that everything took a lot longer," he says. "You could save the MIDI sequence really quickly. But if I decided to save samples it might take 40 minutes. As a result you wouldn't save that often. The amount of remaining tracks I lost because I wasn't saving was not even funny. It was like, 'it feels a bit unstable at the moment, and I'd really love to save, but I've got an idea I'd like to try'...then you'd lose it all."

The tireless, studious, work paid off. The resulting album was a benchmark for Drum 'n' Bass. It showed producers that they could aim for the head as well as the dancing feet. And for that Phatek is proud of his academic achievements.

"It's my first fully accomplished record," he says. "It fulfilled its own prophesy. It was my M.O at the time. It was hard work. But anyone who knows how to make music understands. It was like building a cathedral or something. I was like 24 when I made that, it took some real focus. With the tools I had, I think I pushed the envelope as far as I possibly could."

## Track by track with Phatek

### Hidden Camera

"It was the first thing I did after signing to Virgin, the *Hidden Camera EP*. It's very much Jazz-orientated. All the drums were programmed, but it was four-four. The drums finalised

every six bars. I used to it a lot. It let the track keep hold of you, but not get predictable.

"I remember buying a guitar at the time for a hundred quid, and playing it through a Sony MP5 multi effects box. I combined that with bits off Jazz Funk records. I was buying a lot of records at the time. Because when you picked up a rare record, not many people would have it, so it made your tracks stand out. It was a case of touring, say Tokyo, and buying an old Herbie Hancock album for like £150, an original pressing, and bring that back. Maybe for just one little Flexatone sample that you couldn't ever make yourself. It was a real treasure hunt."

### Smoke Rings

"I'd made that break for the earlier *UFO/Rings Around Saturn 12*". It used to take weeks and weeks to make a beat like that. You'd program every single little backwards and forwards shuffle of every tambourine shake in MIDI. If you'd put so much time into it, you'd want to reuse it.

"I never used a compressor. I didn't use one for years. The drums punch because of the E-MU sampler. There was nothing else that sounded that punchy. You could transpose stuff without losing character. You could play samples and pitch shift them many semi-tones, but it would still have the presence of the original. The E-mu was perfect for the way we were making music. That and the way you used your mixing board. Overdriving the gains on the Mackie 32 desk was standard, everyone in Drum 'n' Bass was aware of that. The distortion really brought out different resonances."

### Minotaur

"This uses that bass bongo sound that I still use today. I'm always pulling it out and trying it in tracks. I did at least one other track like that before, using the bongo drum as a bassline. It had to be somewhere on the album as it was one of my favourite sounds, ever. It came from an obscure patch I had. I always loved it. It was a bit more angular and cleaner and Techno nerd, the way I used it, from the Rave days. It's almost like a gong meets a bongo. Kinda severe, but Jungly at the same time.

"It came together a bit later in the recording sessions. *Hidden*



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Long Player from 2000 that showcases Photek's ability to effortlessly drift between any genre he turns his hand to.

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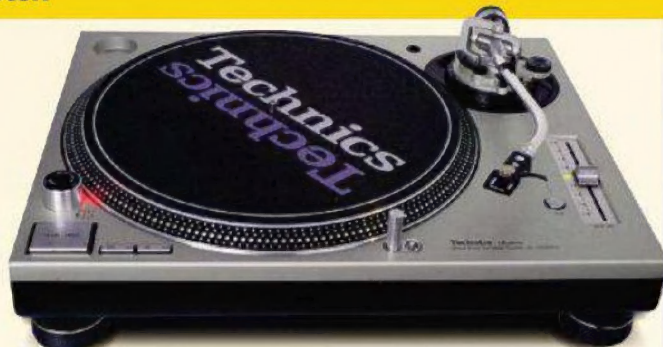
## In The Studio with... Photek

"When I did *Modus*... I was in St. Albans in Hertfordshire, where I was born and grew up.

"By then I had enough money to afford three E-MU samplers, from the E-MU E4 series [5000 and 64], which were at the centre of everything. That gave me the grand total of a minute and a half/two minutes of sample time.

"There was a Mackie 32 track desk, plus I had another 24 channel desk. Then I was using a PC to sequence it running Emagic Logic. I'd just made the switch from Cubase on an Atari.

"My other prized tools were a Lexicon Reverb and a Roland JV-1080. They made up the main body of the stuff I used. I had a few other bits, like an old Proteus and a Sony multi effects box, an MP5. It was like a half white rack unit that not many people had come



across at the time, so I had a lot of effects that weren't in everybody's toolbox. I also had the Technics decks. If you wanted to reverse sections of your sample, or change the pitch of it, the easiest way was to spin the deck backwards, or move the pitch control. You were choosing your samples very

very carefully to loop. You might have had an idea that you wanted it to reverse or bend down at the end, then have a delay at the end.

"You had to construct that process all by hand. I think it was a year after that that hard disc recordings really became the norm."

*Camera* and *KJZ* were definitely first, as they were on the first EP which came out before the album.

*Minotaur* came out in the middle."

### Aleph 1

"I used that old Spectrum-type cassette computer game loading sound. I loved that, programming your own games. You'd get the book from WH Smith and it'd be an inch thick with three crap games in it. And you'd spend the whole of a Sunday typing in these codes. And if you were lucky they actually worked. That noise I used haunted a generation [laughs].

*The '90s* on Metalheadz before that, which was in that decade and at that speed too. I felt it was a big deal to do a song at a different tempo

"Everything was that militant at the time. It was like if you used the wrong bassline, you were rubbish. And you'd have to work for like a year to get your credibility back. It was strictly militant at the time, and we'd all be examining each other's music for drums and samples.

"I remember when Mo' Wax was in full swing. They were leading this charge and embracing all these different types of music. At one point I was ready to sign to Mo' Wax. It

tracks that turned me from being completely Hip Hop obsessed into embracing a whole new wave of music. That track was so heavy. I consider that to be the first Jungle/ Drum 'n' Bass track. He nailed it. To me *Anything Can Happen* is the axiom of Drum 'n' Bass. It's an undisputed fact that that was a Drum 'n' Bass track before its time.

"I used the same kind of tambourine shaker, the same kind of 'down-to-business' feel to it. It was paying respect to that."

### Trans 7

"We were mastering at Metropolis, and I switched this track with another at the last minute. There was a big debate about why *Ni-Ten-Ichi-Ryu* (*Two Swords Technique*) wasn't on the album. But it meant that if people wanted it now they had to search about for it [laughs].

"Against the wishes of Steve at Virgin, I wouldn't let the track go on the album, which was a bit stupid, looking back on it. *Trans 7* went on instead. I remember we were at the mastering house and I didn't have the DAT for it. Stuart Hawkes, who was mastering the album for me, ending up mastering the track off a dubplate that I'd been playing out as a test. So Stuart cleaned it up a bit, but any crackle and hiss you hear is

## Overdriving the gains on the Mackie was standard. Everyone in Drum 'n' Bass was aware of that

"Aleph was a term from Steve Brown, who was A&R at Virgin. He was a Math PhD. It just seemed to fit the project. There are loads of different alephs. An aleph is a fraction of infinity, which meant that they were infinite in themselves. It seemed to fit the way the track seemed to be endless and kept on evolving. I've always loved that name, actually."

### 124

"This title is a reference to the speed of the track in BPM. I'd done *Into*

was between them and Virgin. It would have been interesting to see what would have happened if I'd gone down that route."

### Axiom

"This title came from Steve Brown as well. It's another pure Mathematics term. The definition is something like, it's a point that can be used as a theory in an argument, like an undisputable fact.

"I wanted to make a track similar to *Anything Can Happen* by A Guy Called Gerald. That was one of the



because it's off vinyl. I called it *Trans 7* because it was the seventh track, and the dubplate manufacture was called Trans Co."

### Modus Operandi

"It's still one of my favourite all time tracks. I wouldn't change a thing about it, except maybe cut eight bars out of the intro. It has some lovely rim shots. Erykah Badu highlighted them as the best sounds ever.

"There are right rim shots and wrong rim shots though. There are the ones that hurt your ear, then there's [Tom Scott and The LA Express's] *Sneaking In The Back*, that Massive Attack used perfectly [on *Blue Lines*]. It was a track that had absolutely nothing to do with Drum 'n' Bass at all, but it had the Photek sounds. The title came from the film *Heat*, where they talk about the robbers and someone asks Pacino's character 'what's their M.O?' and he replies 'Their M.O is that they're good', and I loved that.

"Like 'I'm gonna be really good at the rim shot and the balance of the drums', so we called the album *Modus Operandi*."

### KJZ

"That stands for Kirk's Jazz. I was on one of my first ever tours in Japan and I went with Kirk Degiorgio, the Techno producer. He had an amazing knowledge of records so we would go record shopping together a lot. He gave me a DAT packed with stuff

## Photek's Studio Today

"The studio is pretty basic now. It's a nice room in Hollywood, just down the road from Capitol Records, so it's nice to be near that landmark building. It's a far cry from my old bedroom full of smoke and empty teacups.

"It's basically a maxed out Apple Mac with Apogee hardware, running Logic and an SSL rack and G-Series

compressor. I'm using a Roland mic, and a Diezel Herbert Head Guitar Head, which I picked up after working with Nine Inch Nails. I was like, 'how do you get that sound?' and they said it was the Diezel. So I was like 'well, that's what I'm gonna use'. I'm using plug-ins like Camel Audio, but I like to have the most basic plug-ins

other than that because I like to have a session that is transferable to other studios. I try to keep it fairly limited to keep it about what the structure of the track is like rather than what plug-ins I've got. I was actually reminded about that by the producer Switch from Major Lazer when we got together to work on some stuff. He had like one

third-party plug-in other than the Apple plug-ins. Less is more. It's like what I achieved with an E-MU, a sequencer and one effects unit... I probably did more with that than those years where I had every bit of kit at my disposal, and basically fumbled around with it. Too many toys. You can get lost in the world of mouse clicking."



"It sounds very busy to me now. People say it's my best beat. But *Smoke Ring* was much more difficult, really. I programmed a break – I think it's made from bits of Elvin Jones, Max Roach...I tried to

Mark Mondesir, from Courtney Pine's band. He really blew me away. I just chose obscure masters."

### The Fifth Column

"It's got the sounds of a real Ninja throwing star in it, which was near impossible to record. That was the craziest fun tune to make. I also recorded the sound of a bicycle chain

resampled it, sped it up, then put it through effects. I mean it was the most elaborate recording I've ever done. But the sounds were totally designed from scratch, like they do in the movies.

"It fit on the end of the record nicely. It was simply a case of sticking it on at the end. A case of, if you can make it through the whole album, you can probably handle this too. It would have upset the flow of the ambience of the album as a whole if you'd stuck it right in the middle [laughs]." **FM**

It's got the sounds of a real Ninja throwing star in it, which was near impossible to record

that he'd found. I think a lot of the drum hits that make the beats on this track come from that particular DAT collection.

remain respectful and not take their entire swagger and just use it as my own. I think I pieced it together with a whole new swing. There are bits of

whipping through the air to sound like swordplay. I took the sound of every individual swipe and I sampled them into the E-MU and triggered it,

### WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Photek is now working on new material. A series of EPs will be released from February. [myspace.com/photekproductions](http://myspace.com/photekproductions)

### NEED TO KNOW

#### Five essential facts about...

#### Photek and *Modus Operandi*

**1** He kept the same E-MU sampler until he gave it to his gardener's son four years ago.

**2** The working title of the *Modus Operandi* track was *Reverse Kids*.

**3** Photek recently discovered all the original DATs from the recording sessions.

**4** "I'd fall asleep while working on a loop. Wake up, have a cup of tea, and try and remember where I was at and keep going."

**5** New Photek material will reference his experiences of the late '80s/early-90s warehouse party era.